

# Communication Accommodation in Mixed Gender Dyads

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## *Abstract*

Men and women speak differently. That is, there are observable patterns of gender differences in communication. To reconcile differences and facilitate communication it is necessary to use accommodation, the process of adjusting patterns toward or away from a conversational partner. Past research on accommodation has been limited to laboratory settings, in which conversational topics are assigned or suggested and participants are put in an unfamiliar situation with unfamiliar conversational partners. This study extends research on gender accommodation by using unobtrusive observation of male-female dyads in conversation within the public domain. Consistent with the literature, I hypothesized that women would exhibit more convergent accommodation behaviors than men overall; that in conversations in which the topic is stereotypically feminine, men would exhibit more convergent accommodation behaviors than women; and that in high-stress conversations both partners would exhibit divergent accommodation behaviors. Results indicate strong support for the first hypothesis, but do not show support for the second and third hypotheses. Furthermore, the results indicate some deviation from past laboratory research within the factors affecting accommodation and in

stereotypical conversational indicators in use during this study.

### ***Introduction***

What is the difference between responding to an interruption by saying, “I’m not finished yet” and “Can I finish”? That difference in fact is quite valuable from a research perspective. The phrase “I’m not finished yet” is more likely uttered by a man; it shows concern with independence, it is direct, and it is goal-oriented. On the other hand, the phrase “Can I finish” is more likely uttered by a woman; it shows concern with interdependence (social approval), it is indirect, and it is emotion-oriented. Though these responses are similar, they represent some of the small fundamental differences in communication patterns moderated by gender differences. In a world in which men and women are constantly interacting socially and professionally, it is important to consider how they communicate with one another. As a psychology student this area of study is particularly interesting to me. It seems obvious that men and women converse differently, which represents an important area of investigation for researchers. Research that examines speech differences attempts to define speech in terms the other gender might understand in order to better facilitate relationships between men and women. From my understanding gender is defined as a social construction. Gendered language, for the purposes of this study, would therefore be explained as learned behaviors supported by society’s conceptions of gender. The effectiveness of communication between men and women is influenced by the gendered patterns of speech they follow. The research done on these gendered patterns is often difficult because gender differences tend to disappear in mixed gender dyads (male-female pairs). This issue can be addressed via research on the process of accommodation, which may be the cause of the decrease in gender differences.

### **Accommodation**

According to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), accommodation is the process by which people, regardless of gender, adjust their patterns of communication to accomplish social goals. CAT suggests that people accommodate in a convergent manner (or toward one another) when they are concerned with social approval and in a divergent manner (or away from one another) when they are concerned with boundaries. Convergent accommodation may be as simple as adopting the accent of a conversational partner, while divergent accommodation could be enunciating speech to avoid that conversational partner's accent. Furthermore, CAT describes accommodation in terms of symmetry in addition to direction; partners may accommodate equally or, as in most cases, unequally. A 2002 study of 42 men and 42 women in a laboratory setting found that women tended to accommodate more than men, and that generally people accommodated more to male speech than to female speech. The study further suggested that women were more attentive and sensitive to accommodation than men; it also showed that, when listening to speech, women noticed and reacted to accommodation patterns more than men. However, this study lacked conversational reality, as it was done via repeating individual words from a list. In addition, a 2005 study found that women were more likely to accommodate to men phonologically, or in terms of vocal sounds (e.g., pitch). This study also indicated that Northern women may be more advanced in the Northern Cities Chain Shift (or a shift of vowel sounds originating in Northern Cities) due to accommodation, which accounts for a slight difference in the speech of women and men from the same region. Another accommodation variation to consider may be the phenomenon of "mutual hyperconvergence," which is a form of overaccommodation, or convergence on the part of both male and female conversational partners.

### **Factors Affecting Accommodation**

Much of the research on accommodation additionally cites several factors that could affect accommodation processes between genders. The setting of the conversation is an important factor that could affect accommodation. As stated above, much of the past research has been conducted in a laboratory. Studying conversations in more natural settings could result in different patterns of accommodation. Aside from setting, other factors identified in past research as influencing communication between men and women include: status (a lower status individual will accommodate more to a higher status individual); security in the individual's societal role; relationship with the conversational partner (shorter relationships exhibit higher gender differences); and perceptions of the self, partner, and the situation. Most research dealing with status indicates that women accommodate more than men in conversation because they are perceived as having a lower status. Specific factors studied in this research are listed in table 1. A 2003 study with children addressed the issue of perception in conversation. This study supported the idea that accommodation behavior in boys was mediated by their strong beliefs about gender roles. Specifically, boys with strong beliefs about gender roles tended to accommodate less. Research done suggested that the gender of a conversant influences the conversation more than the gender of the conversational partner; one's own gender perceptions more strongly influence what one is hearing, thereby influencing their response. Furthermore, research on gender salience has suggested that stronger salience of one's own gender influences use of stereotypical masculine and feminine language characteristics as the situation or setting allows it. In a 1988 study on conversational accommodation and male dominance roles, conversational patterns were observed via interruption rates. The study showed that women converged more than men in general (interrupted less and allowed interruption more), but accommodation varied over different factors such as utterance length, short and long pauses, back-channels (verbal or

nonverbal communication facilitators used by the listener), and laughter. Another factor of accommodation includes regional dialect (or accent), which may even differ between genders of similar regions as described by Clopper and colleagues (2005). To better understand the process of accommodation, one must examine the gendered patterns males and females tend to follow.

### **Masculine and Feminine Language**

The gendered patterns of speech can be examined via features of language identified as either masculine or feminine. Features of language identified as feminine include intensive adverbs (e.g., *all, some, very*, etc.), emotion words, questions, hedges, longer sentences, minimal responses (e.g., *uh-huh, hmmm*, etc.), and qualifiers, while features of language identified as masculine include self-reference, directive or imperative statements, terms of quantity (e.g., *one, a dozen*, etc.), and judgment adjectives (e.g., *weird, unpleasant*, etc.). In terms of self-reference, experiments show that men not only use the pronoun 'I' more frequently but with shorter speech intervals between uses. Masculine language is often described as direct, succinct, and instrumental, while feminine language is described as indirect, elaborative, and affective. Women are also identified as having clearer speech and larger shifts in pitch within their speech. Furthermore, men are said to use conversation as a means to negotiate or achieve, using "task-oriented language," while women are said to use conversation as a means to intimacy, using "emotion-oriented language." In a 2008 study that utilized text samples and transcripts of conversations (though the gender of partners were not given) it was discovered that women used more psychological and social processes in language while men used more object properties and impersonal language. These general descriptions place a firm divide between masculine and feminine communication, which makes one wonder how members of the opposite gender could tolerate speaking to one another. However, we know that women and men do manage to

communicate somehow and sometimes very well. The question is: how do they do this? The answer appears to be accommodation. Further study of this process is necessary to better understand it.

## **Hypotheses**

Based on past research, the following hypotheses were formed. These hypotheses focus on how accommodation processes perform in male-female conversational pairs as a function of gender. The first hypothesis was intended to address, and possibly confirm, the conclusions of past research regarding general accommodation. The second and third hypotheses were intended to address specific factors affecting accommodation. The second hypothesis proposed in response to suggestions that conversations between male-male and female-female partners can in part be identified due to topic of conversation. A feminine topic could indicate that the female was the dominant conversational partner and may suggest convergent accommodation by the male partner. The third hypothesis tests the mood of conversation. The experience of emotional discomfort or stress may cause participants to become more entrenched in their opinions and thus more entrenched in their own gendered patterns of speech.

1. H1. Women will exhibit more convergent accommodation behaviors and men will exhibit minimal accommodation.
2. H2. In conversations with stereotypically feminine conversation topics (relationships, emotions, and feminine strengths), men will exhibit some convergent accommodation behaviors.
3. H3. In high-stress conversations, both partners will exhibit divergent accommodation behaviors.

## ***Method***

An important factor of this research is the method of data collection. The majority of the research completed on conversational accommodation has taken place in a lab setting in which the participants are unknown to each other, in a foreign situation, and/or in a situation in which conversational topics are assigned or suggested by the researcher. The use of naturalistic observation is the key to offsetting the limitations of laboratory research. By studying accommodation patterns in a natural setting one can improve ecological validity, or generalizability to the real world. This study is a qualitative, or descriptive, research study. Unobtrusive observation techniques were used to collect data via observing participants without their knowledge and without interfering in the natural course of events.

### **Participants**

This study consisted of a sample, chosen via convenience (no participant recruitment), of 26 participants (13 dyads), in which 13 participants were perceived as male and 13 participants were perceived as female. The participants were selected based on the factors of proximity, volume, and talkativeness (quantity of speech); participants who were not close enough to hear, not loud enough to hear, and not communicative enough to warrant recording were not observed. No demographic information was verified by the participants themselves (a limitation of naturalistic observation) and is merely based on the researcher's observations. Participants were not aware of their participation in the study. Participants perceived ages varied between 18 and 65 years ( $M = 28.0$ ). Based on their conversations and nonverbal cues, couples were described as having the relationship of friends ( $N = 7$ ), dating ( $N = 4$ ), or married ( $N = 2$ ).

### **Procedure**

After the Institutional Review Board approval was received on February 17, 2011, this study was executed as follows. Using the record sheet designed based on previous research,

observations were recorded via pen and paper to allow the research to be done in as inconspicuous a method as possible. Recording of participants was completed using a self-designed record sheet based on information from past research and addressed: age, relationship, conversational mood, topics of conversation, location of conversation, time and length of conversation, incidence of feminine and masculine conversational indicators, and illustrative statements. The operational definitions of the recorded characteristics can be found in tables 1 and 2. Because the characteristics of masculine and feminine language were chosen based on past research they may unintentionally be promoting past stereotypes. While this method may be sufficient for the purposes of this study, a reevaluation of stereotypical language characteristics is recommended for future research. The word *perceived* was used in the record sheet in an attempt to show that none of the information was verified by the participants themselves (a limitation of naturalistic observation) and was merely an interpretation by the researcher.

Locations were restricted to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and De Pere, Wisconsin (cities in northeastern Wisconsin approximately 60 miles apart and both with high college student populations). Research was done in a variety of public locations categorized as dining ( $n = 6$ ), sporting event ( $n = 2$ ), or coffeehouse ( $n = 5$ ) as described in table 1. Specific locations were chosen based on the likelihood that male-female dyads would congregate.

## ***Results***

Accommodation was calculated using the incidence of the conversational indicators. Individual accommodation was determined via the adherence (divergent accommodation) to or deviation (convergent accommodation) from gender stereotypical indicators. The incidence of an equal amount of masculine and feminine indicators (or slightly gender-adherent use of

indicators) showed a lack of accommodation behaviors. Total accommodation was examined via a comparison of the total speech behaviors of the conversational partners in each conversation.

The incidence of accommodation is shown in table 4.

Recorded conversations were mostly taken from a dining or coffeehouse location (84.6%) and recorded during the morning (38.5%) or afternoon (53.8%). It appeared that conversations that occurred in a more home-like atmosphere (e.g., university dining hall) were more relaxed and open. The time of day appeared to have no direct influence on accommodation processes. Length of conversation did not influence differences in conversational behavior.

The age of individual participants influenced the data in two distinct ways. In general, as age increased there was more adherence to gender stereotypes in the use of conversational indicators. In addition, a difference of age between partners in the same conversation accounted for more incidences of major accommodation when female partners were more youthful than their male counterparts. However, the small number of couples with this age difference might contest the significance of this result.

In general friendship couples showed less accommodation than dating couples; unfortunately the small number of married couples yielded no reliable conclusions from these results (see table 3). Results from this study (also shown in table 3) reveal that the majority of conversations were of a relaxed mood and had neutral topics (equal distribution of specific and variable conversations).

Conversational indicators (both feminine and masculine) were recorded for both the male and female participant; quantities of these indicators were compared in table 3.

As can be seen in table 3, male participants did not deviate from the conversational norms suggested by past research (i.e., men did not use more feminine language than women). Also of

interest is the high incidence of questions used by both male and female participants. As seen in table 3, however, female participants deviate from the conversational norms suggested by past research in the use of masculine language. Women in this study made more interruptions than men; moreover, it appeared that younger women made notably more interruptions than older women. In addition the use of self-reference by both men and women was similar.

### **Hypothesis 1**

*Women will exhibit more convergent accommodation behaviors and men will exhibit minimal accommodation.*

Results showed strong support for the first hypothesis. According to the results listed in table 4, convergent accommodation attributed to the female partner in conversation occurred in 9 of the 13 couples studied. In addition, equal convergence occurred in 2 of the 13 couples, which is convergent behavior by women, although this finding does not indicate minimal accommodation by men because their behavior is equally convergent. Only 1 of the 13 couples contradicted this hypothesis, in which the man exhibited convergent accommodation.

### **Hypothesis 2**

*In conversations with stereotypically feminine conversation topics (relationships, emotions, and feminine strengths), men will exhibit some convergent accommodation behaviors.*

Results showed little support for the second hypothesis. Only 1 of the 13 couples used feminine conversational topics. In this conversation the woman exhibited minor convergent accommodation. In addition, in the 4 of 13 couples that used masculine conversational topics women also exhibited minor convergent accommodation. As shown by the results, the majority of conversations used neutral conversational topics (table 3). Lack of relevant conversations, due to the small sample overall, prevented any meaningful conclusions in this case.

### **Hypothesis 3**

*In high-stress conversations, both partners will exhibit divergent accommodation behaviors.*

Results, or lack thereof, made the evaluation of the third hypothesis impossible (no valuable conclusions could be reached). Only 1 of the 13 couples exhibited an intense emotional mood (or high-stress conversation). In direct contrast to hypothesis 3, the woman exhibited major convergent accommodation in this conversation. Again, lack of relevant conversations, due to the small sample overall, prevented any meaningful conclusions in this case.

### ***Discussion***

#### **Accommodation**

Consistent with past research, women accommodated convergently toward male partners in the majority of situations within this study. This confirms much of the past laboratory research within the natural setting. In this study, men most often exhibited zero accommodation, while women exhibited minor convergence in most situations. As suggested by past research, this result may be caused by women's lower societal status (women, in general, are still considered to be socially inferior to men); a natural desire in women to facilitate communication; or the fact that women are more attentive and thus more reactive toward accommodation patterns.

#### **Factors Affecting Accommodation**

The factors examined in this study included location, length and time of conversation, age, relationship between partners, conversational mood, and topic as listed in tables 3 and 5. While location did not immediately appear to influence accommodation behaviors, it did seem to influence conversational behavior in general. Within the more home-like setting of a university dining hall, participants seemed more likely to communicate openly. This phenomena would likely account for the single intense mood conversation occurring in such a setting.

Age was used in this study to examine two factors. First, age could be considered as a means of measuring status. Unfortunately, there were no pairs in which a male participant was younger than his female counterpart. However, in the two pairs in which a female participant was younger than her male counterpart, the woman was shown to exhibit convergent accommodation behaviors. This appears to be consistent with research suggesting that status influences accommodation behaviors. Second, age can be examined from a more general perspective in terms of differences between different age groups. Past research has suggested that sex-role definitions and social order influence gender differences in conversations. Overall, it appeared that as age increased, adherence to gender stereotypes in language use increased. This could be attributed to a change in social expectations; women are no longer expected to be as submissive to male partners as they once were. In a recent study using Internet blogs, gender differences in language use had significantly decreased. It has been suggested that women are more likely to be encouraged to use certain facets of stereotypically masculine language, specifically self-reference and interruptions. Research by Hannah et. al. (1999) suggested that women are more concerned with social approval and effective communication than adhering to social norms. This causes uncertainty about categorizing these features of language as masculine or feminine. On the other hand, it appears men may be encouraged to use stereotypically feminine language to a lesser extent than women are encouraged to use stereotypically masculine language. However, it has been noted that emotion-oriented language and task-oriented language usage by men and women may be a manner of preference rather than a socialized process. Research has found that women use emotion-oriented language because it is more useful to achieve their social goals, whereas for men, task-oriented language is more useful to achieve their social goals.

As far as the relationship between partners, it seemed evident that more accommodation occurred between partners with stronger relationships. In comparing relationships between friends and dating couples, dating couples showed more accommodation than friendship pairs. As stated earlier, there were not enough married couples in this sample to make a significant comparison. It could be expected that more accommodation occurs in married couples because the success of a conversation is more important in longer relationships. Misunderstandings could potentially damage the relationship in which both partners have invested time and effort. This gives incentive to use accommodation to modify conversational behaviors.

Mood and topic were the final two factors of accommodation studied here. In addressing the question of mood, the one conversation in which there was an intense mood showed major accommodation by the aggrieved partner (in this case a woman). This suggests that the threatened or angry partner may accommodate more, perhaps in an attempt to create understanding in the other partner. This is in line with research done by Hannah et. al. (1999) that suggests style of speech (facilitative, willing to communicate, or nonfacilitative, unwilling to communicate) is a better predictor of accommodation behavior than gender alone. Unfortunately, there was only one conversation in which this could be examined.

However, the topics of conversation offered an interesting result. In either the stereotypically masculine topics or stereotypically feminine topics, women exhibited minor accommodation. It appears, based on these results, that topics of conversation have little influence over accommodation behaviors, contrary to the suggestions of past research. This finding could be attributed to differing operational definitions of masculine and feminine topics or the small sample size. However, this finding may also indicate a failure of laboratory research to successfully recreate natural conversation topics (and natural settings) resulting in

unintentional bias in past research.

### **Masculine and Feminine Language**

In the realm of feminine language, participants in this study adhered to gender stereotypes. Within the area of emotion-oriented language, a 2008 study suggested that men and women may differ in the type and use of emotion rather than in the frequency alone. Men were found to use more negative emotions, whereas women were found to use more positive emotions. In research done on Internet blogs, it was shown that men used more emotion references or emoticons in mixed-gender newsgroups, showing evidence of accommodation. In the current study, however, men appeared to use significantly less emotion-oriented language; the specific use of this language was indeterminable based on the descriptive results. Because hedges and qualifiers were so similar in their definitions, they were combined in the analysis of the results. Qualifiers were more likely single words, which were more difficult to parse from conversations. This factor may account for the small number of hedges and qualifiers. Finally, questions accounted for the largest number of feminine conversational indicators for both male and female participants. In retrospect, questions may be divided into types more likely to be used by either men or women. It appears that men's questions are used in order to gain specific information, consistent with literature suggesting that men are more task-oriented. On the other hand, women appear to use questions to facilitate conversation in general. These questions are often defined as "tag questions" (e.g., *isn't it?*, *don't you?*, *really?*, etc.) and are thought to express uncertainty and are used as a means of being polite. This is consistent with research stating that women are more concerned about producing intimacy and gaining social approval in conversation.

As far as masculine language, participants did not completely adhere to gender

stereotypes. In the area of task-oriented language, there was strict adherence; thus, this appeared to be the top indicator for masculine language. This finding corresponds with past research on the topic. However, this study found that women used interruptions more than men. This is contrary to previous findings by Helgeson (2009) that may suggest a shift in social or conversational norms. In addition, the use of self-reference is shown as similar in both male and female participants. Again, this may suggest a shift in social or conversational norms and a necessity for future research to re-evaluate stereotypical conversational patterns. Finally, within direct or imperative statements there may be a great deal of overlap into task-oriented language. A command that directs the conversational partner toward a specific goal would fall into both categories (e.g., “Give me your fork, I want to taste your dessert”). Thus, the difference in quantity of usage in direct or imperative statements between male and female participants is similar to the difference in quantity of usage in task-oriented language.

Overall, the conversational indicators examined suggested masculine indicators were used more frequently than feminine indicators. This may be attributed in part to changing conversational norms, but is more likely attributed to the high rate of female accommodation.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, women, in general, exhibit more convergent accommodation behaviors in relation to male conversational counterparts. However, topic of conversation did not seem to affect accommodation behaviors and conversational mood affected accommodation behavior in direct contrast to expectation. Overall, men and women appeared to adhere to gender stereotypes, with the minor exception in the area of self-reference. Furthermore, as age of partners increased, adherence to stereotypes appeared to increase as well. In a comparison of the relationships between partners, friends appeared to accommodate less than dating couples; unfortunately, the

number of married couples was too small to draw any meaningful conclusions. In a comparison of couples (two couples in which the man appeared slightly older than the woman) with differing ages, again, the sample may be too small to draw any meaningful conclusions, but may indicate greater accommodation by the younger partner (in this case both women). In addition, conversational setting appeared to influence conversational behavior rather than directly affecting accommodation behaviors; more home-like or relaxed settings resulted in more relaxed and honest conversations. Length and time of conversation had more influence on the collection of data than on the object of study itself.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are mainly focused in the method of data collection. Because of the sheer number of points of interest being recorded (in order to gain a better picture of the conversation as a whole) and method of collection (pen and paper) human error is likely. Information may have been misheard, misrecorded, or miscoded. In the future this could be avoided via use of a recording device and subsequent coding. In addition, the small sample size limits generalizability of this study. Furthermore, the sample came from two college communities in a small area of northeast Wisconsin, further limiting generalizability of this study. Larger and more varied samples would avoid these limitations.

This study was further limited by the use of category labels used in prior research. While these labels may be sufficient to describe masculine and feminine behavior in this case, they are severely lacking in accuracy. The description of masculine and feminine language must be reevaluated to avoid further promotion of inaccurate stereotypes in research.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study has implications for future research. Research of this kind (naturalistic

observation) is necessary to confirm or disconfirm laboratory results in experiments of a similar nature as well as to confirm results of the current study. A focus on nonverbal as well as verbal indicators in conversation may be valuable for future research. Laboratory research, specifically, may want to increase focus on many of the items this research has brought to light (e.g., topics of conversation, relationships, and changing social norms). Research of this kind may attempt to include a variety of relationships between partners (friends, dating, married); use specific task-oriented or emotion-oriented goals to direct conversations in a masculine or feminine manner; and/or enhance feelings of animosity or attraction prior to conversations in order to artificially create high- and low-stress conversations. In addition it is important for future research to consider the accuracy of masculine and feminine characteristics of language as currently described. It could be more valuable to consider the circumstances and type of person likely to use these features of language rather than depend on gender as the sole organizing characteristic.

Overall, a more intense and thorough study of accommodation processes and influencing factors is necessary to reach definitive results. It remains a point of interest to study the way men and women communicate. Further research may offer greater understanding and thus lead to enhanced communication between members of the opposite gender. The subtle differences between “I’m not finished” and “Can I finish” offer an important insight into these communicative differences and the fundamental differences between men and women.

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## *Appendix*

